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Abstract

This essay, a revised version of an address presented to the Asian Literature in Translation Conference at Birmingham in May 1997, is in two parts. The first part, borrowing extensively from P. Lal, explores 'transcreation' as a mode of translation; the second surveys the growing importance of translation in particular, translating from Indian languages into English - in Indian publishing.

SUJIT MUKHERJEE

Transcreating Translation: An Indian Mode

This essay, a revised version of an address presented to the Asian Literature in Translation Conference at Birmingham in May 1997, is in two parts. The first part, borrowing extensively from P. Lal, explores 'transcreation' as a mode of translation; the second surveys the growing importance of translation – in particular, translating from Indian languages into English – in Indian publishing.

The word 'transcreation' does not appear in the *Longman Modern English Dictionary* nor in the much larger *Living Webster Encyclopaedia Dictionary*. Yet the word has often been used in a particular context, though not perhaps with precise meaning, by Indian producers and consumers of English for at least the last fifty years. Recognition of its usage first appeared in the fifth edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (1996), in the supplement it carries of over one thousand 'English words that are used differently in the Indian context'. 'Transcreation' figures in this list though it does not in the main body of the dictionary, and it is explained as an uncountable noun standing for 'creative translation seen as producing a new version of the original work'. While the word has not yet found wide currency as a substitute for 'translation', one Indian at least, in his several roles as poet, publisher, teacher and translator, has for many years been using 'transcreation' in the sense that has now been authorized by the *Advanced Learners' Dictionary*.

This man is Purushottam Lal, more commonly known as P. Lal of the Writers Workshop of Calcutta, a one-man publishing venture which, as its founder, he has directed and sustained since 1958. Lal's own practice as a translator, and the support he has given as a publisher to the efforts of others, has made available in English an unparalleled range of poetry and fiction from various Indian languages drawn from across several centuries. As of December 1996, over two hundred such titles have been published from Calcutta by the Writers Workshop. Among them is A.K. Ramanujan's translation, *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965); and his transcreation with M.G. Krishnamurthi, *Some Kannada Poems*, (1967).¹

At least 22 titles in English translation can be attributed to Lal himself. They include, from Sanskrit, *The Golden Womb of the Sun* (1965), a

collection of Rig-vedic hymns, and *The Farce of the Drunken Monk* (new edition, 1996), a play by Mahendrarvarman; *The Dhammapada* (1967) from Pali; two volumes of poetry from Bangla; five works of fiction from Hindi, three of them drawn from Munshi Premchand; *The Japji* (1967) from Panjabi; *Ghalib's Love Poems* (1971) from Urdu. Together with this very considerable output, P. Lal has been rendering Vedavyasa's *Mahabharata* into English, shloka by shloka, for many years. This grand project consists of slim fascicules, each with its own introduction and notes. About 160 of them have appeared so far.

I unload these bibliographical details not just to impress readers with the stature of P. Lal but also to indicate the extent of his achievements in this field. Alongside his transcreational practice, he has also written about the process of translation itself. These writings, now available in *Transcreation* (1997), consist of prefaces, introductions and essays written over the period 1964 to 1983. We can take a look at some of these items to see whether P. Lal has given us any theory or outline of a tradition of Indo-English translation (that is, from Indian languages into English).

Arranged in chronological order of publication, and occasionally revised, these essays give us an evolving but not always coherent idea of transcreating. The earliest item, 'On Transcreating "*Shakuntala*"', originally appeared in *Great Sanskrit Plays in Modern Translation* (1964), and includes an introduction to Sanskrit drama in general, as well as a preface to each of the six Sanskrit plays. It is in this essay also that Lal declares his position clearly:

Here begins the transcreator's first headache. Translation is often easy, *traduttori traditori* notwithstanding, and literal translation absurdly so: but perplexing problems arise when a perfectly orderly set of conventions and values of one way of life has to be made perfectly orderly and comprehensible to readers accustomed to values often slightly, and sometimes totally, different. (p. 34)

It is this shifting of ground, this crossing over from one culture to another in time as well as in space, which establishes Lal's preference for transcreation over translation. After citing several examples from Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* of shifts between emphasis and situation, mood and morality, melodrama and representation, he comments: 'Faced by such a variety of material, the translator must edit, reconcile and transmute; his job in many ways becomes largely a matter of transcreation' (p. 37).

The last and also shortest piece in the book is the preface to the collection *Sanskrit Love Lyrics*, first published in 1966. The material is drawn from an eleventh century anthology, the *Subhashita-ratnakosha* compiled by one Vidyakara. Somewhat elusively P. Lal states, 'I have called my versions *translations* rather than *transcreations*', but qualifies the statement with 'I have departed (from the original) when I felt the tone demanded transcreation' (pp. 99-100). Within the brief span of this

preface he has not dwelt upon the difference, if any, between these two modes but is obviously treading some middle ground between them. In general, transcreation involves some departure from the original, as he indicates in his preface to his translation of the *Japji* (1970).

In 1970, at a seminar on Australian and Indian Literature in Delhi organized by the Indian Council for cultural relations, P. Lal presented a paper entitled 'Search for Values in Literature'² which reappears here as 'Myth, Literature and Translation'. This essay deals almost entirely with the translation of ancient Indian literary texts into English, and we may hazard the thought that it is from his experience of grappling with such material that Lal came to prefer 'transcreation' as a more appropriate term for the process. He reminds us that 'translators, sometimes consciously and often unconsciously, mould their versions to the aesthetic and moral taste of their age' (p. 16), and suggests that therein lies the 'creativity' of the transcreator.

However, Lal also cautions us about the perils of such 'moulding' with examples drawn from Edward Fitzgerald and Romesh Chandra Dutt. Fitzgerald (1809-93) became famous for his version of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, drawn from Persian sources.

Here with loaf of Bread beneath the Bough
A flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise now.

In that famous quatrain (as quoted by Lal), Fitzgerald has replaced Omar's comely youth with, in Lal's description, 'a shy girl in Somarkand silk singing to a languidly reclining lover'. In doing so, Fitzgerald acceded to the mores of Victorian England, unlikely to have tolerated the presence of a young boy in such circumstances.

The other example is less known but more weighty. R.C. Dutt (1848-1909) had abridged and retold the *Mahabharata* story in iambic hexameter for publication from England in an Everyman Library edition in 1897. While re-presenting the most sensational scene of Sabha-parva, Dutt has wicked and lustful Duryodhan invite proud and peerless Draupadi to sit upon his 'knee'. The original uses the word *uru*, which can only mean thigh, but, with late nineteenth-century English-language readers in mind (and not necessarily only in England), Dutt has made the change. P. Lal comments: 'It is amusing to picture the discomfort of any male if a lady of Draupadi's ample proportions sat upon his knee' (pp. 17-18).

So far P. Lal has been applying the term 'transcreation' to a more relaxed and free-wheeling process than translation, and mainly in the context of translating older texts. Therefore he takes us by surprise when, having translated Rabindranath Tagore's posthumous volume of poems, *Sesh-Jekha* (Last Poems), he proclaims:

A word about these 'transcreations'. They are faithful to an extreme. The line-

structures, stanza-patterns and, wherever possible, even the inversions have been retained. No attempt has been made to interpret. (p. 87)

Although the term 'transcreation' has been furnished here with inverted commas, it is not distinguished from translation. Similarly interchangeable is Lal's use of these terms in what he wrote after translating some stories by another modern master, Munshi Premchand:

It pleases us to think that these translations, a labour of love and loving-care, are as close to the original as one can possibly get ... If for no other reason, these new versions should interest anyone involved in the art and craft of translation (and transcreation) simply because no efforts were spared ... to produce an exact and elegant English rendering of Premchand. (p. 71)

Opinions may differ on the elegance of this rendering, but exactness can be tested by whoever can read the original.

For the last but not final clue – it was offered fourteen years ago – to the mystery or muddle, we may look at those two companion volumes *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* (1980) and *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (1983), published by Vikas Publishing House of New Delhi. The cover of both volumes announces in gilded letters, 'Condensed from the Sanskrit and Transcreated into English by P. Lal'. With this, yet another dimension – that of condensation – has crept into the concept of 'transcreation' as upheld by P. Lal. Parts of the introductions he wrote for these two books have been reproduced in *Transcreation*. An important element is added to the concept when he says, 'with very rare exceptions, one is always translating only for one's contemporaries. Creative writing may be done for a hundred years hence; not translation' (p. 47). Our case for transcreation – particularly in the Indo-English field – as an Indian mode of translation must rest there for the time being.

Of the many, often contrary, roles played by translation in India, let us take note of three. First, the role of Sanskrit. In post-colonial terminology, Sanskrit would probably be regarded as a 'master language', comparable to the role English assumed in the nineteenth century, with translators into English seen as interventionists assuming power over Indian language writers. Pre-colonial India however recognized no such relationship and, rather than master or mistress, Sanskrit's role was that of a mother giving birth to many literary works in other Indian languages. That is, the general bent of translation was *from* Sanskrit rather than into Sanskrit, and the translators or transcreators assumed no political superiority over the original authors.

Second, the role of Persian. Again, in currently fashionable terms, it was the ruler's language, an empowering medium. But it never became the ruling language. Indeed, long before Persian became the court language of Mughal India, it had served as the language of transmission and dispersal of Indian material abroad. In Mughal India, during the

reign of Akbar, the historian Badauni laboured for four years over rendering the *Ramayana* into Persian, while Prince Dara Shukoh, eldest son of Shah Jahan, commissioned the translation of the Upanishads and other Sanskrit texts into Persian. Persian ceased to be an official language of India in 1837, yet, as asserted by Ashok Vajpeyi,³ about two thousand books in Persian were produced in India during the nineteenth century – a larger number than the books produced in Persia in the same century. Many of these Indian works were translations into Persian of Indian classics.

Finally, the role of English, especially in the context of Indian literature translated into English. When the English language came to India and, from the eighteenth century onwards, gave clear indications of wanting to stay on, one obvious signal was through acts of translation. Starting with Sir William Jones's translation of *Sacoontala*, published in 1789 from Calcutta, nearly all major literary works in Sanskrit and Old Tamil, Pali and the Prakrits, have been translated into English. The late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century translations were done mostly by British scholars of Indology, a few by Americans; from the late nineteenth century onwards, Indians joined the enterprise in growing numbers. Also growing in numbers were translations of literary texts from recent times, coming right down to contemporary authors. As a result, today we have a sizeable quantity of Indian literature of every age in English translation, waiting to be read and written about, reviewed and reworked, studied and taught.

During these past fifty years, Indian literature in English translation has been published under various premises. Let us divide them broadly, for convenience, into public undertakings and private enterprise. Among public undertakings, the two largest publication programmes are run by the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) and the National Book Trust, both fully funded by the Government of India and with headquarters in Delhi.

The Sahitya Akademi was established in 1954. Commissioning translations and getting these published has been one of its functions from the outset. It began by translating major texts of Indian literature into other Indian languages. To this was added the translation of the classics of world literature into Indian languages. Considering that the Akademi now recognizes as many as 22 languages as fit vehicles of Indian literature, it has set itself an impossible task. If, to begin with, only 22 titles were selected for translation, each would have to be translated into 21 other languages, thus producing 462 translated books. So far as I know, this has never happened with any single title.

More immediately relevant is the fact that English is a language not only recognized by the Akademi but also used by it extensively. For example, one of its periodicals, known outside the country as well as inside, is *Indian Literature*. It is in English and every issue carries poetry

and fiction, sometimes criticism, translated from Indian languages into English. The book-length translation programme was reserved at first for the more unambiguously Indian languages, but English found a place here from the early 1960s onwards. Among the earliest translations into English of modern Indian writing were *The Puppet's Tale* (1968) from Bangla by Manik Bandopadhyay and *Wild Bapu of Garambi* (1968) from Marathi by Shridhar Pendse. Other English translations have followed, the latest being the novel *Gora* by Rabindranath Tagore.

The other state-owned organization, the National Book Trust, was set up in 1957 mainly for the purpose of promoting book consciousness in the country. This may seem an odd objective for a largely illiterate country. But our population numbers being what they are, even low literacy can demand a high volume of book production, distribution and sales. Besides organizing various book-related activities, the Trust runs at least ten different publishing programmes. One of them, inaugurated in 1970, is called 'Aadaan-Pradaan' (which literally means give-and-take). In it, a modern Indian literary work, generally of fiction, is selected for translation into eleven other Indian languages. As a result it is possible now to read Premchand in Kannada, Basheer in Asamiya, Pannalal Patel in Bangla, and so on. And it need not be emphasized that competent translation from one Indian language into another can make one forget that one is reading a translated text.

For many years, English was kept out of the Aadaan-Pradaan programme, though the Trust published books in this language in their other programmes. Very recently it was decided to include English, perhaps in recognition of the fact that, even inside India, there is a growing number of those who read English but not any Indian language. Some English translations have been commissioned but have not yet emerged in print.

The first book to be printed in India appeared in 1554, its author was St. Francis Xavier, its language Portuguese, and the site of this event Goa. Regular printing of books in an Indian language (in this case Bangla) did not begin until 1800 when three Christian missionaries of the Baptist Mission started a printing press at Serampore near Calcutta. Their intention was to print translations of the Bible in the different languages of India. This enterprise introduced a literary mode that was to affect every aspect of our cultural life thereafter. As Sisirkumar Das has confirmed: 'The most important event that revolutionized literary production by changing the relationship between the author and the audience and the nature of the transmission of texts was the advent of the printing press.'⁴

We need not go into details of that revolution here but we may note that India had to wait for nearly another one hundred years before the publishing of books, any books, became a matter of commercial enterprise. Within the even more limited realm of the publication of

Indian literature in English translation (what I have called Indo-English literature⁵ elsewhere), quite often it was the author or the translator who financed the publication – later, the printer or the bookseller who obliged. This situation would largely prevail until the middle of the twentieth century.

Early in this century, an unexpected incentive to translate one's own work into English (or nudge one's friends to do so) arose out of the Nobel Prize for Literature of 1913. That year this award was given to a Bengali poet who had earlier published a collection of poems in Bangla entitled *Gitanjali* and subsequently used the same title for a quite different collection of his poems which he had translated into English.

By the time Indo-English publishing turned commercial, it was established that single and complete novels in translation sold better than collections of verse or shorter fiction. While novels have topped the list, poems and short stories have more often than not appeared in anthologies.

Among single and complete novels, the earliest to be translated were Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Durgeshnandini: Or, the Chieftain's Daughter*, translated by Charuchandra Mukherjee (Calcutta, 1880) and *Kapalkundala: A Tale of Bengali Life*, translated by A.A.D. Davies (London, 1885); O. Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, translated by W. Dumergue (Madras, 1890); Romesh Chandra Dutta's *Shivaji: Or, the Morning of Marhatta Life*, translated by K.M. Jhaveri (Ahmedabad, 1899). Among the most recent are Rajendra Yadav's *Strangers on the Roof* from Hindi (Penguin India, 1994); U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Bharatipura* from Kannada (Macmillan India, 1996); Quratullain Haidar's *Aag ka Dariya* from Urdu (forthcoming, Kali for Women).

Finally, a word in praise of those brave publishers who have ventured to put good money into better Indian literature in best English translation. Practically every English-language publisher in India, from Asia Publishing House of old to Roli Books today, has published one or two or ten such titles. But this they have done, and still do, as a minor stream or creek of their main-wave publishing. It is only during the last twenty years that projects large and small have been planned and implemented to put into print English translation of Indian writing on a scale and of a quality not seen before.

The most remarkable of such projects is the one which produced the two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India* (1991 and 1993), compiled and edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. No Indian publisher quite gauged the importance of this project, and thus failed to make a deal while it was in progress and the manuscripts were in the making. Much to the credit of the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, it published the work, and only off the rebound has OUP India produced an Indian edition from Delhi. Starting off on their own, the two intrepid editors managed to involve about 150 persons all over India in

the task of finding out about likely texts, locating them, getting them translated into English, providing biographical information about the authors, and so on. Nearly all such work was done on a goodwill basis – which is not the least remarkable factor contributing to the success of the project. Those who may plan similar projects would do well to note some observations about translation made by the editors in their preface:

We have tried ... in the translations (not always successfully) to strain against ... reductive and stereotypical homogenization ... We preferred translations that did not domesticate the work either into a pan-Indian or into a 'universalist' mode, but demanded of the reader too a translation of herself into another sociohistorical ethics. We have taken pains ... to preserve the regional grain of the work. (p. xxii)

The second notable project of our time is not yet old enough to be likened to a banyan tree but has already grown roots and branches like one. The mother-trunk is simply called *Katha* and its growth has been directed so far by Geeta Dharmarajan. This tirelessly active but non-profit-making organization was started in 1988 and functions on two frontiers. One, known as *Kalpa-vriksham*, acts as a centre for sustainable learning; the other, known as *Katha-vilasam*, performs as a story research and resource centre. The latter relates to our concerns in this paper because it fosters and applauds good translation, especially of short stories, both from Indian languages into English and from one Indian language into another. It gives annual awards to authors, as well as their translators, based on a formal competition and each year the prize-winning stories in English translation are collected and published. Six such collections, known as *Katha Prize Stories*, have been published so far.

One other project we ought to notice is a combination of private vision and commercial effort. Under the series title of 'Modern Indian Novels in Translation', Macmillan India have planned to publish, within five years, 50 to 60 translations of fiction written after 1947 from eleven Indian languages. Eleven titles were released during 1996, one each from Bangla, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada and Punjabi, two each from Malayalam, Oriya and Tamil. Each title is furnished with an introduction by a critic in that language, and with footnotes glossing and otherwise explaining cultural facts and fictions that the English reader (or even the reader in English) is presumed not to know. Consciously designed and elegantly printed, these translations vary in printed extent from 70 to 200 pages while the prices range from 50 to 140 rupees. Given the production costs, these prices are sensationally low, even for India. This has been made possible by funds from the MR. AR. Educational Society of Madras. No better friend of translation can be found in the country today.

To conclude, Indian translators into English have never had it so good. They used to be a neglected, even pitied lot, often not even named in the

published work, just as often not paid. All that has changed now. The translator duly gets acknowledged on the title-page, sometimes even on the cover-front, while the half-title page of the back-cover blurb carries some useful bio-data. However, in their new-found zeal, the translator may sometimes forget that translation has been practised in India for many centuries before the advent of English, hence 'translation' does not automatically mean 'translation into English'. Some such mistake in identification seems to prevail at many of our seminars and other formal discussions of the subject, along with much mouthing of problems and solutions in translation that have little to do with our situation. The obvious remedy for such amnesia would be purposeful study and practice of translation from one Indian language to another in order to arrive in due course at some understanding – if not a full-fledged eight-armed theory – of how the process works on our linguistic soil. Maybe we should devote the next fifty years to such cultivation.

NOTES

1. Subsequently, these would be enlarged to make *The Interior Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), and *Speaking of Shiva* (Harmondsworth: 1973).
2. Published under this title in *Studies in Australian and Indian Literature*, eds. C.D. Narasimhaiah and S. Nagarajan (New Delhi: ICCR, 1971), pp. 136-151.
3. See his intervention at a seminar in Delhi in October 1996, reported in *The Book Review*, xxi, 3 March 1997.
4. *A History of Indian Literature: 1800-1910* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991), p. 32.
5. See *Translation as Discovery* (1982; Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994).